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MODERN ICELAND

By GODMUNDUR KAMBAN

I have sometimes been surprised to meet Americans with a thorough knowledge of so small a country as Iceland, but I have been equally astonished to find persons who firmly believed that Iceland is an uncivilized country. The fact is this: Three times in four centuries, respectively one-third, one-fifth, and one-ninth of its population have perished by volcanic eruptions, plagues, and famine, and the remainder went through terrific ordeals of all kinds. Yet, in spite of that, Iceland presents itself today as a self-governing nation, with full dominion over all its affairs, having taken into its own hands all means of communication, foreign and domestic, and exporting to almost every country of Europe products which have established themselves through their excellence. It has a thoroughly modern school system, with public schools, commercial and high schools, nautical, technical, and agricultural schools, and a college, almost four hundred years old, one of the oldest in Scandinavia, as well as a university, recently established. It has more than twenty-five newspapers, the oldest in existence over fifty years, and fifteen or more periodicals, one of which was founded over ninety years ago and is the oldest Scandinavian magazine. Finally, it has a rich literature and has produced authors and artists who, in spite of the handicap of coming from so small a nation, have made their names known and honored in other countries. If the Icelandic nation, with its old culture and its modern civilization, is to be classed with barbarians, well, the barbarians are to be congratulated!

I should like to ask my readers to take an imaginary trip to Iceland with me. We see by the map that Iceland extends from $63\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ to $66\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ N., its extreme northerly point being touched by the Arctic Circle. It is some 200 miles southeast of Greenland, about 600 miles west of Norway, and 500 miles northwest of Scotland, the distances given being those between the nearest points of the respective coasts. The area of Iceland is 40,500 square miles, or about 8,000 square miles greater than that of Ireland. An erroneous opinion prevails, suggested by its deceptive name and by its high latitude also, that Iceland is a very cold country. On the contrary the climate of Iceland is comparatively mild, its western, southern, and eastern coasts being protected from the polar ice by the Gulf Stream. The summer is never very hot, and the winter never very cold, the average winter temperature along the entire coast line being between 31° and 32° F.

We can choose a shorter and easier route to Iceland now than we could three years ago. We need not now go to England and wait there a week or two for a ship to come from Denmark and take us to our destination.

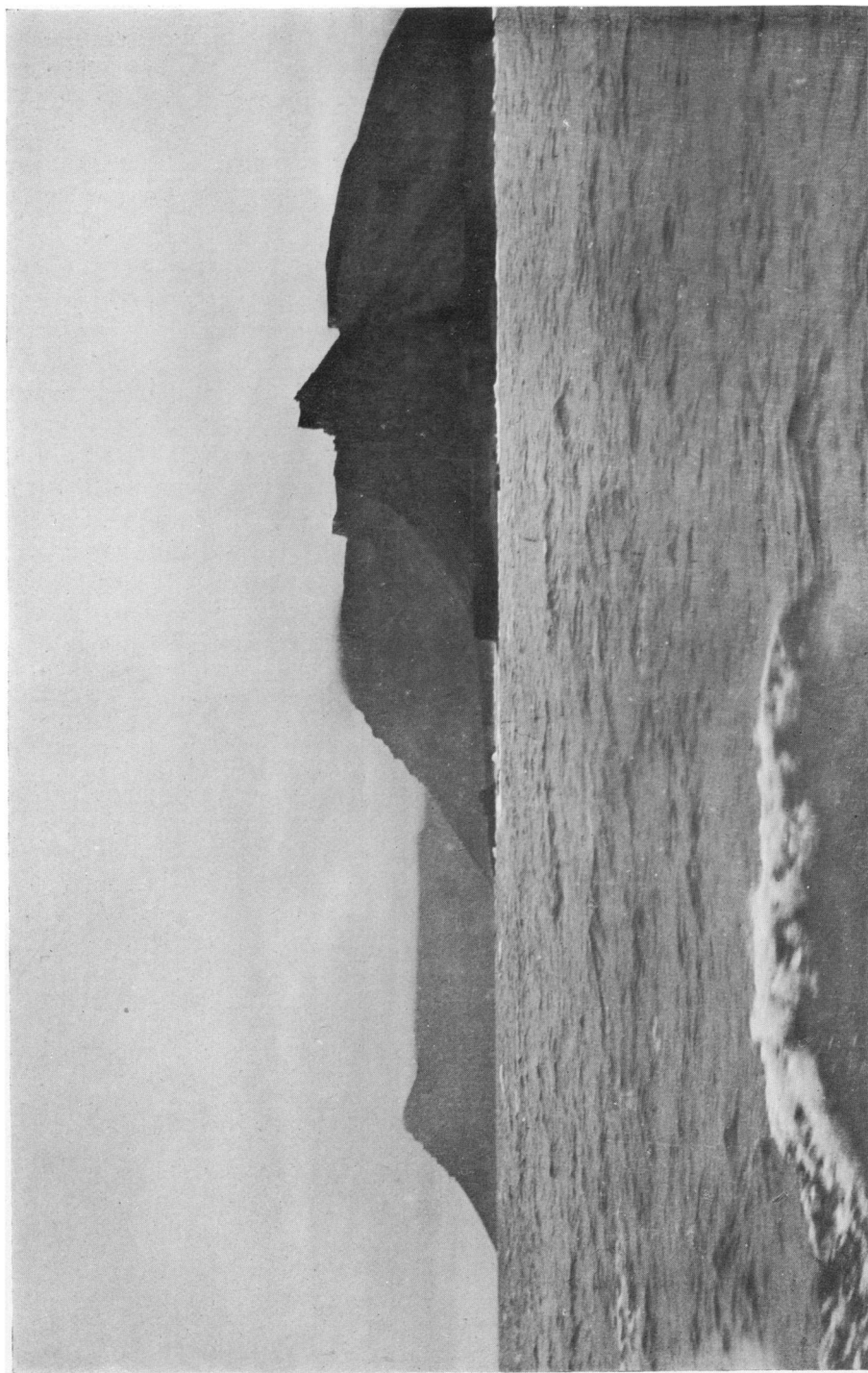


Fig. 1—Iceland's "rock-bound coast": the northwestern corner of the island. (Courtesy of Henry E. Ferguson.)

We can go direct from New York on one of the boats of the Icelandic Steamship Company, either the *Gullfoss* or the *Godafoss*, which make two voyages a year between New York and Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland. While we are on our way to the famous saga land, where practically all the masterpieces of the Scandinavian classics have been written and preserved—works acknowledged by modern scholars not to be inferior to those of Greece—let us first learn how it came about that this isolated and rocky island was ever settled.

SETTLEMENT

In the latter part of the ninth century Harold Fairhair gathered all the small states of Norway under his mighty rule. Iceland had just been discovered by Swedish and Norwegian vikings. Rather than submit to Harold's iron rule, which had deprived them of all their allodial possessions and privileges, these noble Norwegian chieftains and sons of chieftains preferred to go to this new island in the Atlantic, bleak and barren though they knew it was. Thus Iceland was not settled by men whom wealth and resources tempted to cross the sea, but by dethroned noblemen, or their descendants, who preferred a home in an uncongenial climate, where no forests gave them building timber, where no fields gave them food, to the loss of freedom. It should be remembered that the aristocratic spirit still lingering in Iceland, the independence that almost approaches defiance, is simply an inheritance from olden times. Georg Brandes, the Danish critic, well appreciated this characteristic and, in a speech delivered on Iceland a few years ago, closed with this toast:

Long live the glaciers never to be melted!
Long live the fire never to be extinguished!
Long live the defiance never to be bent!
Long live Iceland!

Iceland was settled during the fifty-six years from 874 to 930 A. D., and there has been no immigration since. The population was at the end of that period about 50,000, and it is only 90,000 now. The glorious era of literature, and the romance of life also, which followed after that period, were due to this wonderful birth. For at least four centuries the noble ancestry of the Icelanders was fully acknowledged at all the Scandinavian courts and even in England. All Icelanders of good family were admitted to court in those countries, sometimes took up their residence there for a few years, and were honored with royal gifts. Such was the fashionable method of finishing one's education. The greatness of Iceland's classic literature is not only due to the men who had the time and genius to produce it, but to those also who had the opportunity to share in great scenes and great events.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Since it is in modern Iceland that we are chiefly interested, we now, nine or ten days out of New York, looking out beyond the bow of the ship, can

discern almost a hundred miles away through the blue forget-me-not haze of distance the southernmost glaciers, or *jökler*, rising white and majestic out of the ocean.

Early the next morning we arrive at the Westmen Islands, lying ten miles to the south of Iceland proper and so named after the Irishmen (at that time called Westmen in Scandinavia) who first settled there. They were slaves and belonged to the great number of bondsmen whom the Norwegian chieftains brought with them either from Ireland or Norway.

On one of the precipitous crags of the islands, if we are lucky, we may witness a typical Icelandic mountain scene. Amongst the sheer rocks, which no foot can climb, black gulls, guillemots, puffins, and other sea birds build their nests. The only way to catch these birds is to descend by means of a rope from a projecting ledge above them and to take them with nets. This requires two men, of whom one remains at the brink of the precipice lowering the other, suspended by the rope, down to the nesting places. The work demands great courage and dexterity. Sometimes men go down for other purposes than hunting birds. Angelicas grow there, those beautiful, huge, fan-shaped mountain plants, to be seen in many a garden—and for them many a young man will almost risk his life.

REYKJAVIK

Next morning, we arrive at the capital, Reykjavik. The name means “smoking creek.” When the first settler of Iceland, Ingolf Arnarson, landed at this place in 874 A. D., he observed a bluish-white cloud of vapor hovering over the ground and gave the creek this name. The vapor issued from the hot springs about two miles from the town. There are a great number of such springs in Iceland. A cold brook runs near this spring and the hot water tempers one branch of it into a swimming pool and the other into a general laundry place for the city. Before Ingolf settled, he threw his high-seat pillars into the sea, making a vow that he would build his home at the place where he should find them swept ashore. He found them here; so that he became both the first settler and the founder of the capital.

The inhabitants of Reykjavik number only about 14,000, but it is quite a modern little city, with gas-lit streets, a water-supply system, telephones and telegraphs, a university and all sorts of schools, a public library, and even moving-picture theaters. The new National Library is a fine building with over 80,000 volumes and about 6,000 manuscripts, many of them priceless. The same building houses the archives and ethnographic and natural history collections. There is a church for the free congregation. There is also the State Church, as in nearly all European countries. The religion of Iceland is Lutheran. In the center of the city on a large lawn stands a huge statue of the famous Danish-Icelandic sculptor, Thorvaldsen, given to Iceland at her millennial celebration in 1874. Before we leave we may be fortunate enough to witness one of those sunsets which have given Reykjavik

the name of "The City of Beautiful Sunsets." Some flamelike ball, fashioned of gold and vermillion, seems to have been tossed into the air, and a perfect miracle of colors, to which it is vain to try to give names, is refracted by the mountains and mirrored in the waters.

HISTORIC SCENES

We go next to Thingvellir, "Parliament Field," the historic place where for nine centuries the parliament of Iceland held its meetings. We take an



FIG. 2—The plain of Thingvellir, 25 miles east-northeast of Reykjavik. Thingvellir is a volcanic depression sunk between two great lava fissures, Almannagjá (Fig. 3) and Hrafnagjá. Thingvellir ("Parliament Field") was the meeting-place of the early Icelandic parliament. (Courtesy of the *American-Scandinavian Review*.)

automobile from the city and in less than two hours arrive at the famous Saga retreat. Thingvellir is an extensive plain of grass lying between two lava fields. One of these lava fields is divided by a long deep chasm, the magnificent gorge of Almannagjá, or "Every Man's Rift," so called because the public used to gather there for amusement while the members of parliament were working at the Law Hill. The way to the plain is through a steep portion of this chasm. In the heart of the gulley is the Öxarárfoss, "Axe River Fall." It is the only waterfall in Iceland that might be called artificial. Originally the river flowed quietly along the top of the rocky wall without breaking through; but when this place had been selected as the home of parliament in 930 A. D., the founders took their axes and hewed a bed for the river over the edge, to make the view the more picturesque;

hence the name: "Axe River." The stream runs through a part of the gorge and, crossing Thingvellir, enters the largest lake of Iceland, Thingvallavatn, or "Lake of the Parliament Field," which covers about forty square miles. In this volcanic region Iceland's first parliament convened and founded the Icelandic Republic. A lava expanse between two gorges is the well-known Lögberg, "Law Hill," where the representatives gathered

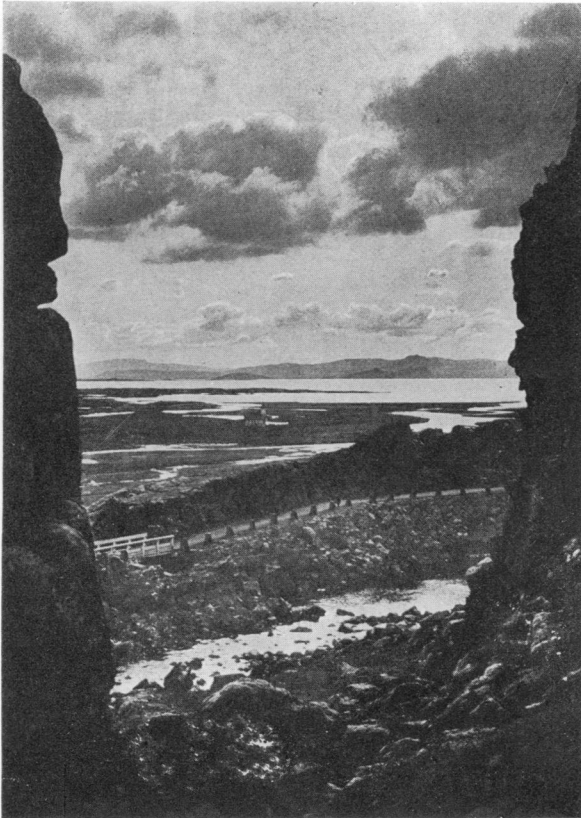


FIG. 3.—View through the lava-fissure of Almannagjá out upon the plain of Thingvellir, with Thingvallavatn, the largest lake in Iceland, in the background.

for legislative purposes. A few remains of the huts in which they lived when in session are to be seen to this day, scattered all along the slope. In the Axe River is the little holm called "Duel Isle" where, in those days of chivalry and romance, men used to settle their affairs of honor.

THE WORLD'S LARGEST GEYSER

Having spent the night at the inn at Thingvellir, we continue our journey to another famous place, the Geysir. In Icelandic the geological term for "geyser" is *hver*, "Geysir" being the name of this particular geyser, the

king of them all, which has come to be applied to all the spouting wells in the world. All around Geysir there are a number of smaller wells, which you can enjoy seeing spout twenty to thirty feet in the air while you are waiting for Geysir itself, for Geysir has grown more reluctant in the past twenty years. It used to spout every hour, but since the great earthquakes in 1896, it never spouts more than three or four times in twenty-four hours. Sometimes Geysir is quiet for a day or two, if left to itself. But fifty or a hundred pounds of soap thrown into the water will produce a fine spouting within half an hour. After a few heavy booms a gigantic column of water suddenly shoots into the air, and the outburst repeats itself at frequent intervals for some ten or fifteen minutes—a display of power and grandeur baffling description. After all is over, you will still stand there, fascinated by the power that has suddenly ceased, and perhaps listlessly watch a woman who has come to boil eggs in the dead calm of the basin—for the temperature of the water is no less than 230° F.

From Geysir it is but a few miles to Gullfoss, “Golden Falls,” the best-known waterfall in Iceland. It is not the highest, but is the one most abundant in water, and is, perhaps, the most beautiful, not only in Iceland, but in Europe.

VOLCANOES AND OTHER FEATURES

Going directly south, through a fair country, in a few days we reach a mountain of conical shape bearing an icy crown. It is the volcano Hekla. Were it not so remote Hekla might have been as famous in history as Vesuvius. Scientifically, Hekla is certainly the most remarkable volcano in the world. We have no record of Hekla's eruptions before the year 1004 A. D., but since that time it has had twenty-six eruptions with an average interval of thirty-five years, the longest time of inactivity being seventy-seven years. Yet, it is not Hekla that has inflicted the greatest disaster on Iceland. East of it lies the crater of Laki, which in 1783 covered an area of 218 square miles with flowing lava. Eighty per cent of the cattle, sheep, and ponies were killed, and more than 9,000 persons, or about one-fifth of the population, perished from famine and epidemics caused by volcanic gases. One of the greatest eruptions of Hekla ever recorded took place in 1845. Then sixty-seven years went by, with no sign of activity, and the scientists began to speak of Hekla as an extinct volcano. In 1912 Hekla awakened once more.

Far off, among the glaciers, lies the largest grotto in Iceland, Surtshellir. For many centuries it used to serve as a place of refuge for highwaymen and outlaws. Deep in its hiding-places there are still lying piles of bones of sheep and ponies that could not possibly be there unless brought by men. From here we ride along the glacier line, north to Mývatn, “Midge Lake.” It is inferior to Lake Thingvalla in size, but not in beauty. It is twenty-one square miles in area and crowded with miniature islands, on which

hundreds of thousands of eider ducks build their nests in spring. Eider down brings in a considerable revenue to Iceland. For generations the bird has been protected by law during the whole year. That is why you can go from one nest to another and with your hands lift the duck from her eggs—so tame is she. The down is not obtained by harming the bird. She builds her nest by plucking the down from her breast and, having gathered it into a little pile, she lays her eggs in the center of it. After she has hatched her eggs and her young ones have left the nest for good, the down is taken and cleaned.

The largest forest in Iceland, Hallormsstadaskógur, is located in the eastern part of the country. There are only four kinds of trees in Iceland: birch, willow, elm, and mountain ash, none of them more than thirty feet in height. During the last generation successful cultivation of the forests was begun by the scientific protection of old trees, by the planting of cuttings of native trees in barren places, and even by the introduction of new species, as the spruce, fir, and other conifers. The country abounds in plants and flowers of such brilliancy in color and richness in fragrance as can be found only in a northern country.

At a little town on the northern coast we take the steamer, and, as the midnight sun gleams like an eye of fire above the horizon, we sail back to Reykjavik. We bid farewell to the gentle, nimblefooted, and persevering Icelandic pony which carried us faithfully and safely on this long and strenuous journey. No one can believe, without a test, how strong and trustworthy this little animal is. As time goes on and the means of travel improve, the Icelandic pony will become less and less important; but, through the people's innate love for horses, the riding pony will always maintain its character.

INDUSTRIES

Farming is one of Iceland's leading industries, with sheep-raising as a prominent feature. An average farm has about ten head of cattle, fifteen ponies, and two hundred sheep; the largest has about fifty cattle, one hundred ponies, and a thousand sheep. There are more than one hundred dairies in the country. They export butter to the value of more than 1,000,000 kroners a year (\$270,000). Another important industry is fishing. The fisheries around the coasts of Iceland are among the largest of the world, equal to those of the Lofoten Islands of Norway and to those of Newfoundland. In the last ten years this industry has grown with tremendous strides.

In 1915, Iceland's exports of fish, meat, butter, horses, wool, eider down, fur, and other products amounted to 55,000,000 kroners (\$17,000,000). The great coal deposits, recently discovered; the enormous amount of boiling water, which could turn the barren land into a blossoming garden; the innumerable waterfalls, capable of running hundreds of factories, show

that Iceland's industrial prospects are highly promising. Two kinds of mines in Iceland are well known, the sulphur mines in the southern part, and the Iceland-spar mines in the eastern part. Iceland spar is the purest calcareous spar existing and has the quality of doubly refracting light, rendering it invaluable for optical purposes.

DRESS

Icelanders dress just as other civilized nations of Europe dress. For the men there is no national dress. As to the women, things are a little more complicated. While the majority in the cities dress just as their sisters do on the Continent, the women in the country still wear the Icelandic national costumes. The women wear as a rule two kinds of costume, an everyday dress, mostly in black, and the festival attire, which is a dress of blue or black velvet or cloth, embroidered with golden filigree around the sleeves and neck. The hair is worn loose, under a crownlike headdress, fastened with a round thin diadem of gold, and is draped into a veil which hangs down the back below the heavy gold belt around the waist. Sometimes the dress is simply of white taffeta or satin. However, the young girls of Iceland do not seem to like the national costume any longer. They have abandoned the sentiments of their grandmothers and aim to do away with their fashions in clothes also. They have fought for their enfranchisement and won it easily. In the new constitution, of June, 1916, Icelandic women were granted the right to vote.

GOVERNMENT

Iceland's political history began in the year 930 A. D., when the old republic was founded. This form of government lasted till Iceland, in 1263, came under the rule of Norway. When Norway became part of the kingdom of Denmark seventeen years later, Iceland also became a part of that kingdom. By the Treaty of Kiel, in 1814, Norway was separated from Denmark, but Iceland was retained by the Danes. Thus the Danes have practically ruled the country for more than six centuries, a period, which, down to the year 1854, was continuously distressful for Iceland. Nature, of course, had a large share in producing the misery and darkness of that time; but more disastrous than all the plagues, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes together, was the pressure of commercial monopoly inflicted by the Danish government. The people of Iceland were left to the mercy of unscrupulous traders for more than two hundred and fifty years. Not only were the people obliged to deal exclusively with Danish merchants or those who had bought the trade privilege from the Danish government, but every farmer and fisherman was compelled to deal only with a merchant of his own county, even though the merchants could not supply them with sufficient food. If a man tried to sell three or four fish outside his county

and was detected, he was immediately stripped, bound to a pole, and flogged till the blood flowed. In 1854, Icelandic statesmen at last succeeded in having this abominable form of trade abolished, and from that year, which marked the beginning of an era of general progress, the people of Iceland have maintained a ceaseless fight for their political freedom. The father of this political reconstruction was the great statesman and historian, Jón Sigurdsson (1811-1879). He was president of Parliament for more than



FIG 4—Scene on the eastern coast. Note the settlement clinging to the narrow foreshore at the foot of the mountain which slopes abruptly to the sea. (Courtesy of Henry E. Ferguson.)

twenty years, and he is still popularly called in Iceland “the President.” He provided Iceland with a tolerably good constitution in 1874 and laid down the principles of the great political reform introduced in November, 1903, by which Iceland became a self-governing country under the protection of the Danish King.

The Althingi, or Parliament, is composed of a Senate, with fourteen members, and a House of Representatives of twenty-six members. All forty members are chosen by popular vote and, when they assemble, choose the senators from their own number. Acts of Parliament are signed by the King of Denmark and countersigned by the Icelandic Prime Minister, who is chosen by Parliament. The legislative power is thus entirely independent of Denmark, and so also is the judicial power. The Supreme Court is located in Reykjavik and consists of two judges and a Chief Justice.

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, ART

The language of the Saga—the ancient literature of Iceland—is the same tongue which was spoken a thousand years ago in all the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. But while it is now a foreign language to Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians, it still lives in Iceland, and these sagas are generally the first books the children read. Icelandic, like the other Scandinavian languages, is of Teutonic origin, a sister tongue



FIG. 5—Hvammur on Skagá Flord on the northern coast. Note in the foreground the carefully kept pasture from which the stones have been removed and heaped into neat piles. (Courtesy of Henry E. Ferguson.)

to German and to English, though the latter is largely influenced by Greek, Latin, and French. You would have no difficulty in tracing the relationship in a sentence like this:

English: If you will give me a glass of water, I shall be thankful. . .

Icelandic: Ef tú vilt gefa mér glas af vatni, skal ég vera þakklatur.

Literature has always been fostered in Iceland. An English statistician has calculated that the annual publication of books in Iceland is proportionately twenty-five times as great as that of the whole British Empire. But the tragedy of being an Icelandic author lies in the fact that the language, though highly cultivated, is spoken and read by fewer persons than any other modern language. If it were as widely spoken as German, or even Swedish or Danish, some of our lyric poets would long ago have gained the same recognition as Heine, Tegnér, or Drachmann. Still, nearly twenty

Icelandic authors of the nineteenth century have had their works translated into the different European languages, some of whom are: Jónas Hallgrímsson, the Wordsworth of Iceland; Steingrímur Thorsteinsson and Matthias Jochumsson, translators of Shakespeare and many English and German classics; Gestur Pálsson and Einar Hjörleifsson, realistic novelists; Einar Benediktsson, a lyric poet; and Indrith Einarsson, a contemporary dramatist.

Certain authors have marked a new era in Icelandic literature. Dissatisfied with writing merely for their own people they definitely broke tradition and, living in Copenhagen, began to write in Danish or bilingually in Danish and Icelandic. This effort of four poets of the younger generation has been crowned with remarkable success. Two of these, Gunnar Gunnarsson and Jónas Gudlaugsson, are novelists who have gained unqualified recognition abroad. But it is drama that has gained the greatest recognition. Indeed, for years, no plays have been welcomed in Denmark with such enthusiasm as the modern Icelandic. Johann Sigurjónsson has written four plays, some of which have found cordial appreciation in foreign countries.

Of Icelandic composers the best known, Sv. Sveinbjörnsson, has lived in Edinburgh for over forty years. He is the author of the Icelandic National Hymn and has written music to a number of English and Icelandic songs. Iceland has at least half a dozen prominent painters. The greatest sculptor is Einar Jónsson. His latest work—a monument commemorating the Icelandic explorer Karlsefni, who landed in America a thousand years ago—is to be erected in Philadelphia.

There are two men of world-wide fame, one an artist, the other a scientist, whose fathers were Icelanders: Albert Bertel Thorvaldsen and Neils Finsen. Finsen, the great physician, who discovered a cure for certain diseases by decolorized light rays and received the Nobel Prize in 1903, belonged to a well-known Icelandic family. He spent his youth in Iceland, graduated from the college of Reykjavik, and then went to the University of Copenhagen.

Two Icelandic scholars are known as the greatest authorities in the so-called "Northern Science," the old and medieval mythology and literary history of Scandinavia: Finnur Jónsson, professor at the University of Copenhagen, and Dr. Björn M. Ólsen, professor at the University of Reykjavik.

A man of great celebrity in scientific circles is the Icelandic geologist, Dr. Thorvaldur Thoroddsen, the first man to write the geographical history of Iceland.¹ The youngest scientist is Dr. Gudmundur Finnbogason,

¹ The most accessible of his major works to the non-Icelandic reader are perhaps:

Geschichte der isländischen Geographie (transl. into German by August Gebhardt), 2 vols. to date, Leipzig, 1897-98. [Cover period to 1750.]

Explorations in Iceland during the Years 1881-98, *Geogr. Journ.*, Vol. 13, 1899, pp. 251-274 and 480-513.

Inland: Grundriss der Geographie und Geologie, Ergänzungshefte zu Petermanns Mitt. Nos. 152-153, Gotha, 1905-06. [With a hypsometric and a geologic map, 1:600,000.]—EDIT. NOTE.

a philosopher whose work has won high commendation from Henri Bergson.

There is one Icelandic name, known in America above all others,—that of the explorer, Vilhjálmur Stefánsson. He was born in Canada, but his mother tongue is Icelandic, both his parents being Icelanders who emigrated forty years ago.

NATIONAL DESTINY

The chief national aim of the Icelandic people, like the aim of every nation, should be, it seems to the writer, the development to the highest degree of that in which she may excel in the competition among nations. Wherever progress is dependent on numbers, it is evident that she will not be able to compete with other countries. But there is one sphere in which she may equal if not surpass other nations in the progress of civilization. That is in the sphere of literature and art. Not that of the ancients, for the Icelanders do not always live in the sagas. The name "Saga Land" does not even exist in Icelandic. She has not forgotten that no country has produced a greater classic literature, not even Greece. It was not Homer, but the author of *Njáls Saga*, who fashioned, in *Skarphédinn*, once for all, the perfect type of inflexible manhood, constantly meeting life's vicissitudes with a "silent sneer." It was not Sophocles, but the author of *Laxdala Saga*, who fashioned, in *Gudrún*, once for all, the perfect type of the intricate nature of woman, "spinning twelve yards of yarn" while she made her husband go to battle against her lover. But it is the Icelandic Renaissance, the art and literature of our own age, blossoming from the roots of this past, through which Iceland may be rescued once more from obscurity. It is in the sphere of art, if in any sphere at all, that this little nation will be able to display her greatness. For in national life, as in art, it is quality, not vastness, the intention, not the extension, which counts. After all, is not art the only thing immortal? When one contemplates what Iceland has suffered, and yet what she has achieved, what she is today, one can well understand the strange sense of pride that an Icelandic may feel in belonging to the smallest of all nations.